

'The time that remains: Elia Suleiman and the London Palestinian Film Festival 2010' [Review] Elia Suleiman (2009) The time that remains

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The Time That Remains:
Elia Suleiman and the London Palestinian Film Festival 2010

While Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* won the Cannes Jury Prize in 2002, it has taken the director five years to overcome the innumerable funding hurdles for his latest film, *The Time That Remains*; a stunningly powerful, poetic and haunting depiction of historical and contemporary Palestinian turbulence. Although the film was first shown last year, it was the imminent UK “general” release that prompted a rare appearance, Q+A and post-screening talk with the director at the 2010 London Palestinian Film Festival. In his latest offering and public speaking, Suleiman has brought to light, perhaps for the first time, a coherent rendition of his vision; a new wave of critical anti-nationalism from Palestine.

As with *Divine Intervention* and *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) before it, *The Time That Remains* fuses the personal and the political, although this incarnation spans four distinct time periods in the director's family history. Beginning in the midst of the 1948 war, Suleiman recreates scenes of brutality and heroism from his father's diaries, whose work as a gun-maker for the resistance resulted in a savage attack by Israeli soldiers in which he was left for dead. The narrative then shifts to 1970 where an Arab minority school is shown “winning” the Hebrew singing contest and the death of Nasser causes great emotional upheaval; it is a time of political delicacy and sceptical attempts at repair. Moving forwards once more, into the 1980s we encounter, for the last time, the director's father, whose death formed the pivotal narrative in *Divine Intervention*, before the present day scenario and decline of E.S.'s mother as she succumbs to the perils of diabetes. It is, in Suleiman's own words, a place and time where hope springs more from individual genetics than from any inherent redemption in the political environment.

Yet there is hope. *The Time That Remains*, in the space of its eponymity, implies a call

for pragmatism; all that is left must be treasured. It is also a space, as in all of Suleiman's work, in which grim humour – both Keatonesque and Beckettesque, especially the latter with the barren sparseness of the Middle Eastern landscape – is to be found. We laugh at the repeated failure of the nameless neighbour to self-immolate, interspersed with the absurd logic for the Arab defeat in 1948: they didn't drink enough; we see an Israeli tank – unsurprisingly not loaned (apparently the Israeli army wanted a “thank you” credit), but instead rendered in entirely convincing CGI – tracking a Palestinian youth and his banal mobile phone conversation; we are shown the Israelis imposing curfew on Ramallah's late night raves, unable to help being drawn in by the electronic rhythms of YAS' *Ma Rida*. There are also elements of the magical realism so prominent in Suleiman's earlier work: in one of the most brilliant scenes, crossing the West Bank Barrier becomes little more than an Olympic pole-vault feat for the suddenly athletic protagonist. However, unlike *Divine Intervention*, the majority of resistance activity does not have this unearthly feel, it has, instead, a distinctly lead-lined approach; it is less magical and more real, a sure-fire indication of the urgency and gravitas of the situation.

The Time That Remains is filmed in two stylistically distinct modes. The first, a narrative, is a more linear representation than has been seen in Suleiman's work to date and covers the historical periods. The second is a reversion to the silence and stillness that has defined his oeuvre. When questioned on this, the director replied that, indeed, the precise moment of this shift can be named; as his mother succumbs to the temptation of a late-night ice cream and rapidly accelerates the progress of her diabetes, reality is slowed into what he terms, with distinct resonances of Bakhtin, “Vertical Time”. If the historicity of *The Time That Remains* relies on what Bakhtin termed the Chronotope – a term implying vertically stacked, multiple specificities of time, place and context, be it a reader and novel, two novel's characters interacting or, in this case, an environment that is “localized” to Palestine – it also

focuses upon a generality of human experience, be that co-existence with one's neighbours or the death of one's parents. As Bakhtin himself puts it, originally on the novel but equally applicable to the multiple contexts of Suleiman's film: "Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist".¹

There is also a politico-personal undercurrent to the film's subtitle, *Chronicle of a Present Absentee*. This term, which refers formally to Palestinians displaced by Israeli forces in the 1948 war, but who remained in the region, is applicable to Suleiman's work in cinematographic terms. The implied oxymoronic "collapsed distance" in the term "present absentee" marks the Cartesian inner and outer on which scenes of sustained silence rely, yet then destroy; a refutation of the existence of "private" experience. However, it is also a historical distance. Where Suleiman has reconstructed from his father's memoirs, the film contains greater detail, more cinematographic, narrative presence; an evidence-based justification or validation, but also an admission of unfamiliarity. Where he is intimate with the subject matter – the period of his own lifetime, his own presence – such a narrative mode is curiously absent. The stillness of these later images, a narrative woven within a personal proximity of external silence, is a technique of survival used by those on the brink of apocalypse; a means of retreat from the impending doom to prolong the time that remains.

However, as was all too clearly reflected in many of the audience questions at the 2010 screening, Suleiman's work is frequently approached with preconceptions of hostility. When asked how he thought "we" could "win" for "our cause", Suleiman appeared perturbed and proceeded to distance himself from all aspects of the terminology: "I don't believe in tribes", he stated, "I will fight to raise the Palestinian flag, and then I will fight to have it lowered". It is important to note in this that Suleiman can only be said to be anti-Zionist in

1 M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), p. 252.

the sense that he is a self-proclaimed anti-nationalist. In the short term, he would favour a Palestinian state which would, with Leninist overtones, wither away into insignificance. Crucially, though, his work presents a disapproval of nationalism and the injustice that it causes. In the world of E.S., the foundation of states can never be more than an economic activity of displacement, trading in a currency of human lives, with an exchange rate of “diasporic experience” central to Jewish, but now also Palestinian, identity.

Yet, it seems, this interpretation can only be reached by a viewer already familiar with Suleiman's work. The postmodern panoptical perspectives of *Divine Intervention* made clear, particularly through the non-delineation of the real from the fantastical – the film's magical realism – that simple dichotomies of opposition do not hold. While that may well be the intention of *The Time That Remains*, the injustices are, perhaps, too localised with too little generality; the film can seem to play out as one long, spatio-temporally specific beating of the Palestinian underdog. In the context of Suleiman's entire corpus, the political intention of the director can shine through; in isolation, it could be seen to reaffirm the logic of opposition.

There are, of course, cues towards this dismantling of hostile alterity, the most prominent of which is the flawed (or, perhaps, humanised) light in which the Palestinians themselves are shown. It could hardly be said that the Palestinians depicted within the film are perfect, although they are certainly shown as the survivors of a great social injustice. They frequently couch their desire for violent revenge in the misogynist lexicon of “fucking”; they are often logically inconsistent and, most importantly, they retaliate with physical, direct aggression. The obvious question, in light of their suffering is: why should they not? One of Suleiman's answers is, surely: time is a limited commodity, too precious to waste.

At the outset, I referred to *The Time That Remains* as coherent. It should now be clear that there are specific epistemological, and hermeneutic, prerequisites under which this

coherence holds. If a dogmatic political tirade was the aim of this work, the film would be propaganda, not art. However, Suleiman has succeeded in opening, once again, a poetic space in which it becomes possible to interrogate the continuous impossibility of the situation between Israel and Palestine. He seems, also, to suggest, gently, a solution. As we approach the eleventh hour, it has become pointless to continue as before. We can either, as does the film, prolong our allocated chronological remainder through a retreat into a personal space of lengthened, or rotated to vertical, time, or we can avert the apocalypse. As to which choice will be made, as we approach the eschaton, only time will tell.

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